

New pharmacy, medical school partnership seeks better, safer medications

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St. Louis College of Pharmacy and Washington University School of Medicine have established the Center for Clinical Pharmacology, with the aim of finding better, safer medications. The new center will be housed in the pharmacy school's new Academic and Research Building. Credit: Tim Hursley

St. Louis College of Pharmacy and Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis are joining forces to find better, safer and more effective ways to use prescription medications to improve health. Researchers from the two institutions are collaborating to create the Center for Clinical Pharmacology.

The center's initial focus will be on translational and clinical research to better understand and improve pain treatment. The new center will concentrate on how to best use existing drugs to treat pain, as well as on developing and identifying new analgesic drugs and other therapeutic approaches for pain.

According to the Institute of Medicine's 2011 report "Relieving Pain in America," about 100 million American adults are affected by [chronic pain](#), which is more than the total affected by heart disease, cancer and diabetes combined. The report recommended better data gathering to define the scope of the pain problem, and it also recommended that health-care providers tailor pain care to each patient's experience. Tailoring treatments to individual patients is one of the goals of the new center.

"Chronic pain affects about one in every three adults in the United States, and health-care providers often struggle with how best to use medications to help patients control it," said Larry J. Shapiro, MD, executive vice chancellor for medical affairs and dean of the School of Medicine. "This new center will play an important role in identifying better ways to deal with this public health problem."

The center's five laboratories will occupy 12,000 square feet in St. Louis College of Pharmacy's new Academic and Research Building.

"This is the first major partnership between our institutions," said John A. Pieper, PharmD, president of St. Louis College of Pharmacy.

"Together, we are focused on innovative solutions to find answers to the national epidemic of abuse and misuse of analgesic agents. We believe pharmacists and physicians working side by side will lead to the best solutions in health care. It is what we're teaching in our classrooms and clinical settings, so it only makes sense to carry over those collaborations to clinical research as well."

In addition to finding ways to better treat pain, the researchers at the center will try to prevent some of the problems associated with pain medications. Prescription opioid analgesics play a role in 17,000 deaths every year in the United States, about the same as the number of homicides annually across the country. In addition, several studies have estimated that societal costs attributable to prescription opioid abuse are more than \$70 billion annually, including health-care costs, costs for lost productivity in the workplace and costs in the criminal justice system.

"Patients with chronic pain often are lumped into a single category, but our ongoing research continues to demonstrate that what's really needed are better ways to tailor appropriate treatments to patients," said Alex S. Evers, MD, the Henry E. Mallinckrodt Professor and head of Washington University's Department of Anesthesiology. "By using genetic and pharmacological approaches, we believe researchers at the center will be able to do just that."

The new director of the Center for Clinical Pharmacology will be Evan D. Kharasch, MD, PhD, the Russell D. and Mary B. Shelden Professor of Anesthesiology and professor of biochemistry and molecular biophysics at the School of Medicine. He has directed the anesthesiology department's Division of Clinical and Translational Research since 2005, and he served as Washington University's vice chancellor for research from 2009-14.

"This collaborative venture between the academic institutions of pharmacy and medicine is unique in the field of [clinical pharmacology](#) and a major strength," Kharasch said. "Combining the expertise of both institutions will allow us to develop and deliver on the promises of precision medicine and find the most effective ways to treat individual patients."

Also joining the center as co-director is Karen Seibert, PhD. Seibert is a

professor of pathology and immunology and of genetics. She also is director of Genomics and Pathology Services (GPS) at the School of Medicine and associate director of shared services at the Siteman Cancer Center. Seibert spent two decades in the pharmaceutical industry, most recently as vice president of research and development for the St. Louis laboratories of Pfizer Inc.

Faculty at the center will have academic appointments in both institutions. Three of the five laboratories that make up the new center will be led by researchers with primary appointments at St. Louis College of Pharmacy; the other two by faculty members with primary appointments at the School of Medicine.

Although inadequately treated pain is a significant public health problem, so is the risk of addiction. The development of dependence on opioid painkillers can become a gateway to heroin and other drugs of abuse, Kharasch warned. And he stressed the importance of finding better pain treatments because for many people, long-term use of opioid drugs can become a health problem.

"Through better understanding of pain mechanisms, genetics, differences between individual patients and new types of medications, we want to improve and personalize [pain](#) therapy and the safety of the powerful drugs we use," Kharasch said. "This new center is the realization of several years of planning to address unmet research needs in clinical therapeutics at both institutions, and we are excited to recruit talented new investigators to contribute to this effort."

Along with facilitating a partnership between the School of Medicine and St. Louis College of Pharmacy, Kharasch plans to involve local businesses, health-care leaders and medical care systems in the center's research efforts.

Provided by Washington University School of Medicine

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